

## LESSON 4: Tomah Joseph: A Traditional Passamaquoddy Birchbark Artist

### OVERVIEW:

Through color images, students will explore birchbark objects made by well-known 19<sup>th</sup> century Passamaquoddy birchbark artist Tomah Joseph. Students will discover the artistry, history and economics behind Joseph's work.



**TIME REQUIRED:** 1 hour

**In the following activity, students will examine some objects created by Tomah Joseph.**

### MATERIALS:

- *Tomah Joseph* focus worksheets: Log Holder, Picture Frame, Magazine Holder, Handkerchief Box
- Photos of four Tomah Joseph objects
- Teacher Supplementary Information

### PREPARATION:

1. *Tomah Joseph* focus worksheet: Make enough copies for each group.
2. Organize photos of Tomah Joseph objects for easy distribution.

### VOCABULARY

#### Motif

A repeated design.

#### Etch

To produce a picture or design by cutting into a surface, such as birchbark or glass.

### INTRODUCTION:

In the late 1800s, Passamaquoddy artist Tomah Joseph created etched birchbark objects that could be appreciated as art, used as household decoration, and serve as tourist souvenirs (Lester, 1993). He made everyday things like log holders, baskets, letter holders, umbrella stands, picture frames, hat racks, magazine holders, canoe models and wastebaskets. On these birchbark objects, Tomah Joseph illustrated traditional Passamaquoddy origin stories (how things came to be), featuring animals like the snowshoe hare (mahteqwes) and the barred owl (kokogus), as well as the Passamaquoddy trickster/culture hero, Koluskap. He also used plants, half-circles, wigwams, double curves and star patterns to make patterns/borders around his objects. Tomah Joseph's work was and still is very well known—some of his most famous clients included the Roosevelt family on Campobello Island (Lester, 1993).

**PROCEDURE:**

1. Divide the class into four groups.
2. Each group should be given one photo of a Tomah Joseph object and one *Tomah Joseph* focus worksheet (one worksheet per group).
3. Explain to students that they have 20 minutes to work on the focus worksheets and that they should be prepared to discuss their findings with the rest of the class.
4. Direct each group to choose one person to record that group's answers.

**WRAP UP:**

After all groups have finished their research, each group should share their information with the rest of the class by answering the following questions:

- What is the object?
- What kinds of decorations or designs does it show, and do they tell a story?
- Who do you think would have bought the object?

These objects were made to be sold to summer tourists and summer residents as souvenirs either of their visit to the area or of their personal meeting with Tomah Joseph. Many Passamaquoddy people of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century made baskets and other objects to sell to tourists.

Today, Wabanaki basketmakers still make ash and birchbark baskets, and sell them to shops and galleries around the country.

**TIMELINE CONNECTIONS:** Add the following important dates to the timeline of Passamaquoddy history:

- 1905 Tomah Joseph Makes a Birchbark Canoe for Franklin D. Roosevelt
- 1994 Mary Mitchell Gabriel, Passamaquoddy Master Basketmaker, Receives a \$10,000 National Heritage Fellowship Award from the National Endowment for the Arts—One of 11 out of 220 Folk Artist Fellowship Recipients, and the Only One from New England

**EXTENSIONS:**

Visit a museum or festival where Passamaquoddy baskets are displayed or made. Make a chart and keep track of the different styles, shapes, weaves and materials demonstrated in the baskets. What kinds of other Passamaquoddy artwork are found there?

The Abbe Museum, Bar Harbor <<http://www.abbemuseum.org>>

The Downeast Heritage Center, Calais <<http://www.downeastheritage.org/home.html>>

The Hudson Museum, Orono <<http://www.umaine.edu/hudsonmuseum/index.php>>

The Native American Festival, every July, Bar Harbor <<http://www.abbemuseum.org>>

Sipayik Indian Days Celebration, Pleasant Point, for information call: (207) 853-2600

The Wapohnaki Museum and Resource Center, Pleasant Point <<http://www.wabanaki.com/museum.htm>>